1: Federal W-5 (no date) 1986
NN23 Sea Islanders NN23
Georgia

had known of people who were "fuhbid tuh eat eel fish mong udduh tings." [65]

Our visit was such a pleasant one that we stayed for a while longer to talk. The household was an unusually contented and peaceful one. The old couple were apparently satisfied with a simple scheme of existence although Alec did venture the usual remark regarding his old-age pension. "Sho would lak tuh hab it, missus. Mebbe yuh kin git dem gubment folks tuh see dat I gits it."

When we were about ready to leave, a middle-aged daughter, who had been lingering at the gateway, came up and joined the group. She confided that she had been married to one man for thirty years, but that he had died and she had recently remarried. This second marriage was evidently not so successful, for she said, "Dis huzbun ain lak duh fus one. He's triflin an ain sech a good providuh. Wen I loss duh fus huzbun, I sho loss ebryting."

At that time Rachel and Alec had been married for fifty-seven years and during all this period there had been few differences or unpleasant happenings. As Alec escorted us to the car he told us of his high regard for his wife, assuring us in conclusion, "I ain nebuh had no trouble wid uh. Ain so much as tech uh wid a pocket hankuhchuh sence I done bin had uh."

A little later we went to visit Susan Maxwell,* who was sitting on the porch of her house when we drove up. She was about ninety-two years old and, having been ill recently, was snugly wrapped up in a variety of garments.

The house, she told us, was about one hundred years old. A hall ran from the front to the back part, and from the back porch a passage led to a lean-to kitchen. A barn near the house was about to collapse from age and lack of repair. In the yard a black ox lay chained under a tree and a large

* *Susan Maxwell, Possum Point.*

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
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given island in order to be accepted as a natural member of the community. Members who are brought to the islands as spouses are recognized as members by association with a known island family, but even one who has been married to an islander for twenty or more years never achieves the status of a full member of the community.

Membership is most often established through oral transmission of lineage, as opposed to birth certificates or other documents. Thus one is expected to know one's lineage, for this knowledge can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection in any social setting. It is normal protocol, for example, for a young person to undergo seemingly intense interrogation by an older island resident who wishes to place the younger person. If one can explain satisfactorily who one's parents are, who one's parents' parents are, or even who one's cousins' parents are, then kinship is established and one is viewed as a member of the community to be accorded all due warmth and hospitality. The islanders can be chilly and sometimes openly hostile to strangers, black or white, who have no local kinship ties or affiliations.

As would be expected in such closed communities, familial ties, marriages, and the concept of the extended family are taken with utmost seriousness. The extended family is an African-like social tradition on the Sea Islands, just as it is in most inland black communities; acknowledging and readily accepting the obligations and responsibilities due not only to one's spouse but also to one's spouse's family is a part of island culture. The "conjugal bond is strong and literally lasts until death parts the spouses," and common-law marriages are as valid and stable in the eyes of the community as those marriages contracted under law. There is a low incidence of divorce and separation. Disagreements and conflicts do arise in Sea Island households, of course, as they do in any household. But understanding and accepting the relationships inherited in an extended family appear to alleviate many of the conflicts experienced in the sort of nuclear family that is characteristic of European cultures, such as mother-in-law/daughter-in-law antagonism. Like the members of extended families in Africa, people on the Sea Islands act with deference toward their elders, and most elders accord a great degree of respect to young adults, especially those with children. That is, conflicts are minimized because each member acknowledges and respects the others' domains.[44]

Most of the inhabitants of any given island are related; thus marriage between persons from the same island is not encouraged. Chil-

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
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Children are expected from Sea Island marriages, whether they are the couple's own or just living with them. Children are highly prized regardless of the financial condition of the parents, and abortion is rare and generally viewed as an abomination against God and nature. If a young couple joins a parent's household, rather than establishing a new one, the elder members of the family usually take responsibility for the care and discipline of the children. Many elderly residents, the guardians of several generations of children, attribute their longevity and good health to the belief that they *cannot* die until all the children for whom they are responsible are grown and able to care for themselves, or until their responsibilities are delegated to someone else. Some children are reared by sisters, aunts, uncles, or even distant cousins. It is not unusual for a child to reach adulthood living not more than a block from the natural parent but residing with another relative, who is perhaps childless or more financially secure. Even children born out of wedlock generally know who their fathers and grandparents are. These children are given the same respect in the community as legitimate children and are as likely to be reared by the paternal side of the family as by the maternal side.[45]

The church is probably the most important social organization in the Sea Island communities. Outwardly, the Sunday services follow the patterns prescribed for Baptist and Methodist churches and are thus based on Christian doctrine. Some of the beliefs of black Christians in the Sea Islands are quite distinctive. For example, I have heard many elderly residents speak of a tripartite division of the human being into body, soul, and spirit, whereas Christian doctrine teaches that a person has only a body and a soul which is synonymous with the spirit. According to many elderly island residents, when one dies, only the soul returns to the kingdom of God. The body and spirit remain on earth. And although the soul of the dead person cannot harm the living, the spirit can, at will, cause another to harm him- or herself.[46]

This concept of a tripartite body, soul, and spirit, with the body and spirit remaining on earth after death and able to influence the living, is widespread in West Africa today. Many African peoples do not conceive of any geographical separation between the real world and the spirit world; as soon as the body dies physically, they believe the person arrives in the spirit world.[47] To these physical and spiritual entities, some societies add a belief in a "shadow" entity.[48] The Sea

3: Creel H-4 (no date) 1988
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175 567 584 were neither sanctioned in law nor respected by slaveholders. Still Baptist churches "devoutly" passed sentence upon Gullahs for "adultery" and "fornication." Perhaps this gesture aimed at giving Gullahs a false send of equality—the same laws for both races regardless of circumstances, as implied by the Savannah River Baptist Association.[70] Possibly this an attempt to demoralize and humiliate—main ingredients of Christianity as taught to slaves. In the interest of "order" and cupidity, masters sometimes denied legitimacy to slaves' emotional inclinations, forcing couples to live together against their will because of convenience and profitability. According to Sam Mitchell, on the Chaplin plantations a slave had to tell the master as soon as he began to "cote." Mitchell added, "If Maussa say 'no you can't marry dat gal' den dat settle it, you can't marry um. He don't lak his slave to marry on nodder puson plantation." In like manner, Harry McMillan testified before the Freedom Inquiry Commission:

> A man saw a young woman and if he liked her he would get a pass from his Master to go where she was. If his owner did not choose to give him the pass he [the master] would pick out another woman and make him [the slave] live with her whether he loved her or not.[71]

Under these oppressive circumstances, where personal preference was ignored, Gullahs understandably had no respect for the church edict establishing rules of conduct about marital status and decisions.

175 [836] [583] Among Gullahs no stigma was attached to sex without marriage as defined by white society. When asked what proportion of young women had sexual intercourse prior to marriage, Robert Smalls replied the majority did but "it was not considered an evil thing." When individuals settled with mates of their choosing he added, such unions were considered binding. Smalls explained male-female relations among the Gullahs:

> [589] [765] If a woman loses her husband she mourns for him and will not marry again for a year and a half, unless she is driven to it by want and must have somebody to help her. . . .
> . . . You hardly ever find a husband will separate from his wife except he finds [586] her going with another man. . . . very few . . . married women are carried away by sexual passion if their husbands can take care of them.[72]

175 567 581 597 Church minutes, then, belie the actual situation by stressing stealth and immorality among the Sea Island region's black population. Gullahs simply operated under a different moral code. Thomas Chaplin, noted

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how strange it was that his first wife's two maids, who married in 1849, were still on "his place," in 1876. But what to Chaplin was even "stranger," was that these "girls" still "have the very same husbands." Undoubtedly many slaves kept the same mates if circumstances permitted. But Chaplin was aware of this fidelity only because the slaves were house servants. In a letter to Wendell Phillips Garrison, Laura Towne expressed "indignation" about articles appearing in the *Nation* concerning "immorality among the people of these islands." No one, said Towne, saw more of the islanders than she, "in every relation." Towne gave "an utter denial" of Gullah "immorality." Slavery "did what it could to confuse the minds of slaves with regard to conjugal relations." But added Towne, "a native fidelity—instinct perhaps," made the slave marriages "sacred in their own eyes and kept together without legal obligations." On the contrary, Towne stated that in her school of large boys and girls, there was "less impropriety—more purity— I may truly say— than is always met with among whites." When "immorality" occurred, it was "strictly dealt with by the church and by general reprobation in social life."[73]

Northern missionaries reported cases of slaves legalizing their unions out of respect for each other and also probably because of their love of ceremony and "title." Many couples having grown old together, went before "de parson." Elizabeth Botume witnessed the occasion of the civil ceremony between of Smart and Mary Washington who lived together for forty years. Smart and Mary shared a great deal through the years, and had nineteen children, only one of whom survived the antebellum years. According to Botume, the couple were very happy over the recognition their enduring relationship was given:

> They walked away together side by side, for the first time endowed with the honorable title of husband and wife. Smart chuckled well when we congratulated him, saying—
> "Him's my wife for sartin, now. Ef the ole hen run away, I shall cotch him sure."
> We thought there was no danger of good Aunt Mary's running away after so many years of faithful service.

During and directly after the Civil War, the situation wrought by slavery often led to much unhappiness. Husbands and wives who were separated and forced to take new partners returned to claim their old mates. Baptist discipline did not proscribe slave sales or interfere in any way with the "property" rights of slaveholders. "There was often great dis-

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175 appointment," wrote Botume. "Sometimes two men claimed the same
581 woman, whilst she coquetted not a little, evidently disposed to take the
586 one that bid the highest." But, Botume added that this "rarely if ever" occurred when children were involved.[74]

175 Although the Committee on Discipline within Baptist churches oper-
795 ated as a religious tribunal, efforts to use Christianity to control the Gul-
797 lahs was largely unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Gullahs seemed almost unanimously to prefer religious affiliation through Baptist membership rather than Methodist. Methodist missionaries displayed a more sincere and human interest in the slaves than their sometimes ruthless, Puritan-oriented Baptist masters. "This seems to be a very unpromising portion of our field of labor," wrote one Methodist missionary, "all owing to the prejudices of the negroes." He continued:

> We cannot . . . find fault with the negroes in this portion of our mission field, for preferring another communion to our own; but our voice will ever be lifted against them, for refusing the bread of life, because, forsooth it comes not to them on a silver salver, or from the hands of one who has not "gone down into or come up out of the water."[75]

The cermonious manner in which Baptists initiated converts into church fellowship impressed the Gullahs. Also, despite Calvinist orientation, Baptists were nonheirarchial, worship was less formal, and church structure less legalistic. But, such considerations were not as significant in influencing Gullah acceptance of the Baptist denomination as were other factors. Baptists slaves exercised a religious autonomy the Methodists would not hear of, and this, coupled with the fact that Sea Island slavery was a quasi-absentee type, contributed to the Gullahs' opportunity to control their own religion, to a point. Moreover, in their endeavor to keep blacks under civil control and to keep them on the plantations, slaveholders allowed spiritual permissiveness by legitimizing already existing black societies and leaving them in the hands of black leaders with only minimal white supervision.[76]

175 The extent to which spiritual autonomy influenced Gullah culture and
993 social organization is most evident in the prominence of black leadership. Baptist planters recommended black watchmen who were supposedly "tried and true," and slaveholders apparently had great confidence in those cho-
554 sen. Such elders were usually staunch church members, but also influ-
797 ential and respected in the quarters. Methodist missionaries were skep-

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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burden upon the parents, for the master provided for all children alike. A violation of marriage vows was accompanied by no disgrace or punishment other than that inflicted by the master or by the church if the culprit were a member. There seems to have been very little intimacy between the white men and the Negro women on St. Helena Island. The northern missionaries found not more than five or six mulattoes on the whole Island in 1861.

There were forces sufficiently strong to keep many slaves faithful to their marriage vows. Chancellor Harper, of Charleston, called attention in 1854 to the fact that slave marriages were often faithfully adhered to during life.[22] In 1857 a sea-island planter, in recounting the deaths among his people, mentioned with sadness that of "poor old Sandy and his wife Joan." "The latter died apparently of mere debility; and her husband, after watching until her death, went to bed at midnight, complaining merely of a sore throat, and expired the next evening without any one suspecting that he was seriously ill." The planter concluded that the faithful old man had died of "mental depression, operating on a feeble constitution."[23] On Edisto Island there still lives "Old Jeff," born in slavery, who, although as devoted to his wife as Sandy, lived on after her death. Every day he went to her grave to mourn and there he slept at night. After several months his friends became alarmed at his behavior. Upon being questioned he explained that he intended to dig up

[22] "Memoir on Slavery," DeBow, *Industrial Resources of the United States*, II, 219.

[23] Couper-Wylly Papers, James Hamilton Couper to James Couper, April 13, 1857.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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his wife's bones and take them to his house so that he could have 'he wit' me always."[24]

FAMILY LIFE

In their attempt to impress the sacredness of marriage upon their slaves, the whites were often discouraged by the low value which the slave women placed upon chastity. Wives were as prone as husbands to break the marriage vows. In fact, the female tended to be the dominant sex in slave life. It was decidedly to the advantage of a black man to have the good will of one of the women of the plantation, for life thereby was made much easier. On the plantations where clothes were issued by the yard, it was customary for the women to do the sewing for the family so that a husband was almost as dependent upon his wife for a new suit of clothes as he was upon his master; but, on the plantations where superannuated women were delegated to do all the plantation sewing and mending, the slave men were somewhat more independent of their women.

The weekly issuance of rations, a predominant portion of which was corn, was also dealt out in the bulk and must not only be shelled but pounded into grits before being cooked. It was customary for the women and children to assemble at the cornhouse on Monday, an hour or so before "fust dark," to receive the weekly allowance from the driver. Kneeling or sitting upon the ground with her children about her, each woman shelled the corn, using a cob to increase her speed. On some of the plantations there were improvised mortars for shelling corn, made of

[24] Information obtained from J. Swinton Whaley, Little Edisto, S. C., and from a personal interview with the Negro.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
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I learned that old Nat's boy, Antony, who wanted to marry Phillis, had given her up and taken Mary Ann, July's daughter, without saying a word to me or any other white man. I called him up to me one afternoon when I was there and told him he must go to church and be married by the minister according to law. He flatly refused, with a good deal of impertinence, using some profane language learned at camp. I thereupon told him he must go home with me, showing him I had a pistol, which I put in my outside pocket. He came along, swearing all the way and muttering his determination not to comply. I gave him lodging in the dark hole under the stairs, with nothing to eat. Next morning old Nat came and expostulated with him, joined by old Ben and Uncle Sam, all of whom pitched into him and told him he was very foolish and ought to be proud of such a chance. He finally gave up and promised to go. So I let him off with an apology. Next Sunday he appeared and was married before a whole church full of people.[48]

But the missionaries found to their sorrow that the Negroes did not always have the proper respect for "a marriage according to law." Limus, a driver, had a wife and grown children on his own plantation and another wife on a plantation nearby. Nevertheless, the missionaries tried to settle such cases with a due regard for the parties concerned and attempted to build up among the people a feeling of family loyalty and pride. They urged the Negroes to buy a table whenever possible and to have regular times for the family meal when all should assemble for the occasion.

Pierce at once opened the two white churches on St. Helena Island which had been closed since "gun shoot." Among the superintendents there were several divinity students and ministers who preached to the Negroes on

[48] *Letters from Port Royal*, p. 95.